

MARY LOUISE BAKER

A Woman of Uncommon Talent

By Janet Simon



MARY LOUISE BAKER WORKED AT THE PENN MUSEUM as an artist and restorer for 28 years, from 1908 until 1936, when poor eyesight forced her to retire. She was considered one of the best archaeological illustrators of her time, as she traveled to the far reaches of the world in her service to the Museum. Baker wrote regularly in a diary and even wrote an autobiography. This article pulls from those sources and describes some of the more memorable days of her career.



M. Louise Baker applying finishing touches to the reconstruction of the bull-headed gold lyre from Ur (PM object B17694), ca. 1930. PM image 8274. Opposite: Detail of watercolor of Islamic pottery fragments by M. Louise Baker, 1922. PM image 171569.



ABOVE: Pen and ink drawing of Attic Red Figure amphora (PM object MS5399) by M. Louise Baker, April 21, 1914. PM image 171559.



ABOVE: Watercolor of detail of fountain mosaic, Cairo (PM object NEP35) by M. Louise Baker, October 21, 1921. PM image 183134.

Miss Baker (1872–1962), as she was known at the Museum, was a complex and singular woman—determined, focused, and strong-willed. She refused to let being a woman hold her back and traveled alone to areas such as Central America and the Middle East when few women in the early part of the 20th century did so. She doggedly pursued getting an education, attending art school despite very limited funds.

A staunch Quaker, she used *thee* and *thou* as forms of address but did not hesitate to stand up to chauvinistic male employers or supervisors for what she believed was fair and essential to pursue her work. Baker offered insightful and often humorous accounts in her diaries, which she kept for most of her life, and in her unpublished autobiography. Through a connection with Baker family members established by Penn Museum Consulting Scholar and Mesoamerican specialist Dr. Elin Danien, Baker’s 54 diaries from 1889 to 1960, her autobiography, and scrapbooks were donated to the Museum Archives in 2011.

Professionally, M. (Mary) Louise Baker spent much of her career between positions as an artist at the Penn Museum and teaching art at the George School, a Quaker boarding school in Bucks County, PA.



During her years as Museum Artist, Baker established an international reputation as the preeminent archaeological artist of her time. Her unmatched technical skill in scientific illustration was used to document artifacts in pen and ink, charcoal, and watercolor. Her drawings and paintings have an unusual three-dimensional quality. Many are signed with her distinctive M.L.B.

A Lifetime of Illness

Baker suffered lifelong health difficulties and serious eye problems. In 1895, she contracted spinal meningitis and for the next 10 years she never fully escaped pain in her back, head, and eyes. In the 1890s and early 1900s, treatment methods, even in Philadelphia—a city of medical schools and hospitals—were often ineffective and excruciatingly painful. The eye problems required several surgeries and periodic enforced periods of rest. With her eyesight failing, she retired from the Museum in 1936 and then the George School in 1938. By 1949, she was completely blind.

ABOVE: M. Louise Baker, December, 1901. Photograph by The Hansbury Studio, Philadelphia. PM image 183122. OPPOSITE: Watercolor of Maya vase from Quiche, Guatemala (PM object 12696) by M. Louise Baker, September, 1910. PM image 165048.

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Baker was born in Alliance, Ohio in 1872, a descendant of colonial Pennsylvania Quaker families. At the age of 19, she came to Pennsylvania to complete her education and then taught in several one-room schools in Chester County. During this period, she describes her difficulties: “my eyes were growing worse and the severe headaches made study almost impossible. Finally I spent a fortnight in Wilmington under an oculist’s care. He ordered my temples to be leeches and cupped to relieve the congestion. [Yes, this was the year 1893!] This method of blood letting was carried on in the back rooms of barber shops. The huge leeches were ravenous when released from the box and quickly fastened themselves to my temples by triangular incisions....Here they gorged themselves until full....In my most successful nightmares I recall these awful leeches.”

Still being “miserable in health,” Baker decided to concentrate on art and, in 1900, enrolled at the Pennsylvania Museum School of Industrial Art, now the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the University of the Arts, in a four-year course. “We were in a new century, I was beginning a new life...and now was the time to break away,” Baker wrote. She changed her name from Mary Baker (for a disliked relative) to M. Louise Baker—her original name used by her mother—and engaged a room at the YWCA in Philadelphia for \$3–4 a week for room, board, and laundry.

Finances were always a problem. Down to her last nickel, she walked over 80 blocks on a Saturday hunting work, but her search was fruitless. Finally she was hired in the advertising department of Kelly’s Furniture Store. She worked six half days at \$7 per week to do pen and ink sketches of household equipment for newspaper ads and made arrangements with the School to make up missed class work. A scholarship awarded her at the end of the year made her second year’s school attendance possible.

LEFT, TOP: Watercolor of vase from Chamá, Guatemala (PM object 38-14-1) by M. Louise Baker. PM image 165046. LEFT, BOTTOM: Watercolor of vase from Ratinlixul, Guatemala (PM object NA11701) by M. Louise Baker. PM image 165061. OPPOSITE: Twelfth Dynasty jewelry from Buhen, Nubia, excavated 1907–1911. Watercolor by M. Louise Baker, 1911. PM image 153909.

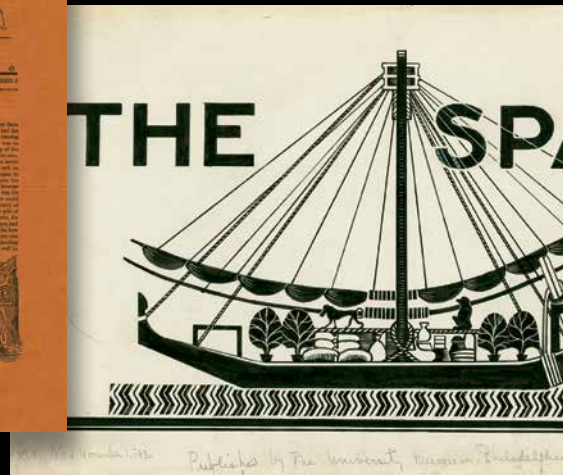


M. LOUISE BAKER

Children's Illustrations

The Spade was a children's magazine published for two years by the Education Department of the Penn Museum, from November, 1930 to May, 1932. It presented myths and stories for children, beautifully illustrated by Baker and other artists.

RIGHT: Cover of *The Spade*, vol. 1, no. 2 (December, 1930). Featuring a Northwest Coast theme, with illustrations by M. Louise Baker. PM image 298895. CENTER: Egyptian ship illustration for *The Spade*, vol. 1, no. 1 (November, 1930). Pen and ink drawing by M. Louise Baker, 1930. PM image 171575.



An Invitation to Work at the Museum

Late in her second year, Baker secured work with Clarence B. Moore of the Academy of Natural Sciences, restoring pottery from Mr. Moore's southern U.S. Indian expeditions and illustrating his publications. Upon her graduation from the Museum School, Louise received an appointment to teach drawing two days a week at the George School in Bucks County, PA for \$200 per year. She continued her growing business in illustrating for magazines, publishing houses, and advertising.

In 1908, on Clarence Moore's recommendation,

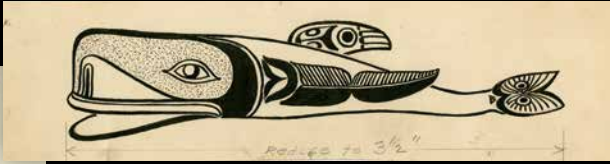


Design on Benin carved ivory cup, Nigeria (PM object 29-94-2). Watercolor by M. Louise Baker, 1926. PM image 171566.

Baker was invited by Dr. George Byron Gordon, Curator of General Ethnology at the Penn Museum, to work on a large consignment of Nubian pottery which had just arrived from Egypt. Baker carried out a full schedule of teaching at the George School, taking art classes at night, and working at both the Museum and the Academy of Natural Sciences. Her "sadly overtaxed" eyes began to ulcerate, and a new oculist warned her that several months' rest was imperative. "Many hours were spent in a darkened room with bandaged eyes...After several weeks I was permitted to use my eyes for one minute a day, increasing a minute each day until ten were reached... then 25 became the limit for weeks to come."

During part-time work at the Penn Museum, a Nubian necklace which Baker was painting disappeared after lunch. "Naturally I in particular, was under suspicion as I had been present when the jewelry had been returned to its case that day and was one of the last two people to have seen it," she related. The necklace was never found, but Baker's exquisite painting of it remains part of the Museum's collection. (See plate on preceding page.)

Baker described her work: "My 28 years connection with the University of Pennsylvania Museum was one of happy memories...My work was varied and far reaching, consequently exciting and fascinating. When I mounted my stool in the morning, I never knew what part of the globe I would visit before sundown." She continued, "I



ABOVE: "Tail Piece" illustration for *The Spade*, vol. I, no. 2 (December, 1930). Pen and ink drawing by M. Louise Baker, 1930. PM image 298893. RIGHT: Illustration for "Pelops and Hippodama" in *The Spade*, vol. I, no. 3 (January, 1931). Pen and ink drawing by M. Louise Baker, 1931. PM image 298894.



spent days in research, was never hurried—or seldom! I illustrated the publications of the various expeditions, drew maps, designed posters and bill boards, repaired huge Chinese frescoes from ladders and scaffolds, restored Egyptian pillars and pottery from Greece and Crete and so through the years, I met the challenge of the unexpected, with full joy in the doing and with success.”

She related that Director Gordon—known to be a difficult man—would not tolerate socializing during business hours, and on one occasion evicted a restless intern from Baker’s office and locked her door from the outside to prevent repetition. “My office was small, the day exceedingly hot, the electric fan I had requested weeks before had not arrived. The sum total was too much. In a trice I slipped from my stool, donned my hat and started for home; unfortunately I had to pass his office door. Looking up and sensing revolt, he sprang to his feet and demanded the cause of this early departure. I replied curtly—‘I have never been locked in my office and I’m not going to begin now and in this heat!’ To my amazement, he promptly agreed ‘You are quite right Miss Baker’ and before I realized it I was being personally returned to my office with apologies and solicitations en route. His electric fan was transferred to my room with in the hour.”

Among her Penn Museum Egyptian projects was “reproducing a replica to scale of Merenptah’s throne

room recently excavated at Memphis, Egypt. The necessary research and working drawings, made to scale, were fascinating.” The delicately colored throne room replica is still displayed in the Museum’s Egyptian Galleries. She also painted a 57" X 42" watercolor, which illustrated a theoretical restoration of the throne room. Baker sometimes worked with an assistant: “we worked upon some of the massive pillars from Memphis which, for facility in transportation, had been cut into two or three pieces.



“The Throne Room in the Palace of Merenptah at Memphis.” Watercolor and graphite on paper, by M. Louise Baker, November, 1920. PM image 150556.

M. Louise Baker's Masterpiece

This watercolor restoration of Lintel 3 from Piedras Negras, Guatemala was completed by M. Louise Baker in 1936. At the commanding size of 29.5" x 52", Baker considered this piece her swan song, concluding her 28-year career as an archaeological illustrator and restorer with the Penn Museum. J. Alden Mason believed that Lintel 3 was the finest piece of Maya sculpture in existence, when he discovered it in 1931.



ABOVE: Carved Lintel 3 from the Late Classic Maya site of Piedras Negras. PM image 21137. RIGHT: Detail of M. Louise Baker's watercolor restoration of Lintel 3 from Piedras Negras, Guatemala. PM image 176733.

The Art of Reconstruction

Typical of Classic Maya limestone monuments, Lintel 3 has a scene carved on the front and hieroglyphic texts on both its sides. Uncharacteristically, this monument was originally carved in a uniquely naturalistic style, with figures gesturing in poses not typical of Classic Maya monuments. Some Mayanists, however, have been critical of the three-quarter view of the enthroned figure, since there is no precedent for it in Maya art.

M. Louise Baker's reconstruction of this severely eroded lintel reveals her talent as both an artist and archaeological restorer.







ABOVE: Pen and ink drawing of vase detail from Quiche, Guatemala (PM object 12696) by M. Louise Baker, 1910. PM image 165049.

From a 15 foot scaffold Ethel and I repaired and restored the beautiful lotus capitals.”

Further eye difficulties required immediate surgery for glaucoma by well-known oculist Dr. L.W. Deichler. Thanks to Dr. Deichler’s skill and care, “ [I] was given 12 years in which to do the best work of my life despite my handicap, until I was finally overtaken by blindness after the seventh operation in 1949.”

Adventures in the Americas and Iraq

With a six-month leave of absence from the George School, Baker was sent by the Museum in February 1931 to Mexico and Central America to locate Maya pottery and reproduce the best examples in color for forthcoming limited edition portfolios of Maya art. After a rough trip through the jungle to Chichen Itza, she visited Sylvanus Morley, who was in charge of excavations and reconstruction of ruins there. She told him of J. Alden Mason’s desire for her to visit his camp at Piedras Negras, Guatemala, which would subsequently require travel by canoe, mule, boat, and plane. Morley was insistent



in his objections that “at the moment labour unrest in the chicle (chewing gum) industry made travel dangerous and besides women never travelled alone in that country.” Baker wrote, “My ardor was somewhat dampened but not extinguished!” Morley refused to let Louise accompany him and his wife to Piedras Negras. A man, who had just covered the same route Baker was planning, burst out, “For heaven’s sake don’t try it, the rains are on, for a good part of the way my mule slid upon his heels and haunches down the mountain side.”

Although Baker came down with shingles “laid on with a heavy hand,” she insisted that she would “continue my quest despite insistent communications from the Museum urging me to return at once rather than further jeopardise my health.” During her train journey from Vera Cruz to the Pacific Coast, the distraught conductor told her, “Senoritas did not travel alone in that country—would there be anyone to meet me? Where would I spend the night?” She persevered and eventually returned to New York on a United Fruit boat loaded with bananas. “The authorities at the Museum were duly impressed by what I had produced in Central America both in quantity and quality. Mr. Jayne’s [Museum Director] constant refrain was ‘How did you do it and in so short a time and with your handicaps!’ Such appreciation I found most gratifying.” The Maya pottery project was Baker’s largest project and the magnum opus of her Penn Museum work.

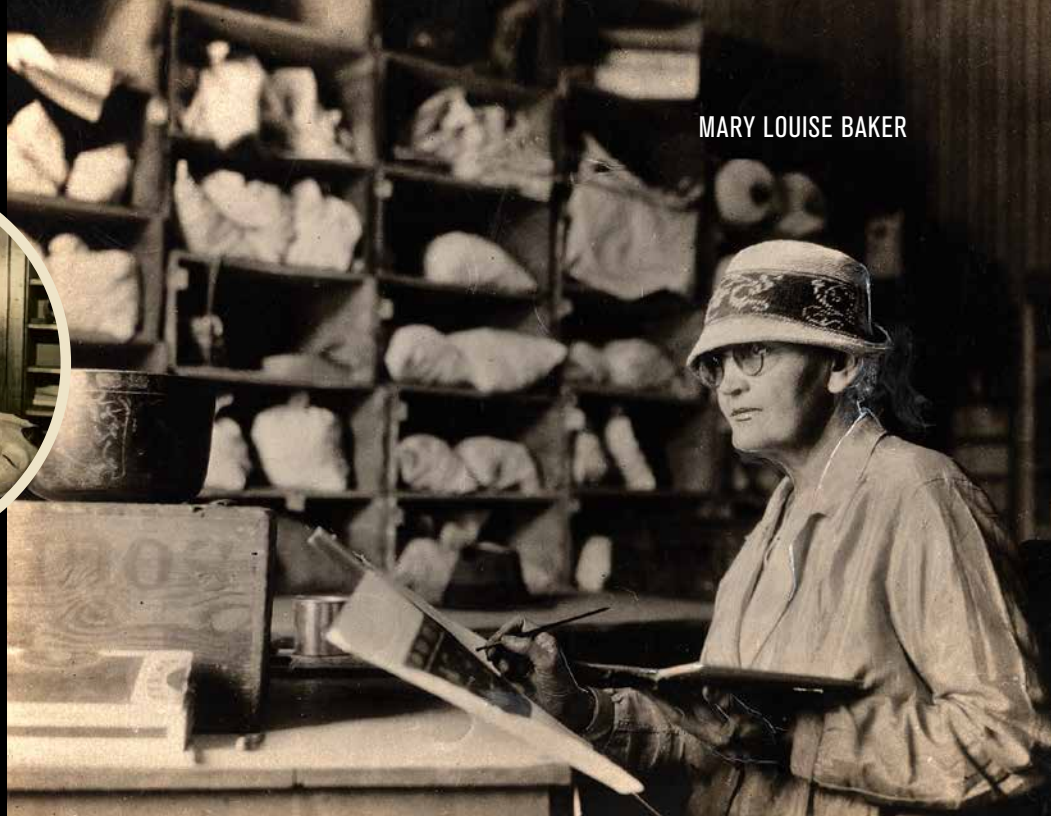
Louise Baker was the only choice of Sir Leonard Woolley, director for 12 years of the Joint Expedition by the British Museum and the Penn Museum, to illustrate the published report for the highly successful archaeology expedition to Ur, Iraq. She set out in September 1932 to work on Ur material in Philadelphia, London, and Baghdad. Her trip by small bus across 536 miles of the Syrian desert covered “a wilderness of space and sand” where “there were not roads but occasionally tracks and a signpost.”

The return trip across the desert included a light armored car manned by a soldier with a machine gun to protect against bandits. When a tire blew out, the agitated driver was unable to cope with the emergency.

LEFT: Sticker from M. Louise Baker’s notebook, from her travels to paint finds from the Royal Tombs of Ur in Iraq. PM image 298896.



ABOVE: M. Louise Baker with papier mache mask. March, 1937. PM image 183115.
RIGHT: Baker painting the "Luna" Vase, Guatemala City, June, 1931. PM image 176327.



"Fortunately I had been trained in the skill of changing tires in the days of the old Model T," Baker wrote. In a short time, she had the blown tire removed and the spare in place; "my ignorance of our danger controlled my blood pressure."

Working on objects from Ur in England, it was the discourteous treatment by male staff members of the British Museum which irked her immensely. "If I had to work in a closed room containing special material I was locked in with no chance to escape until my jailor returned." On one such day, locked in a room with a specimen also locked in a tall glass case, where reflections and cross lights made work almost impossible, Baker climbed upon a table, pulled the chair up after herself, and sat upon the table, level with the specimen where reflections no longer hampered her work. "I recall with glee the astonishment of my jailor when he unlocked the door and witnessed my exalted position. I doubt if such desecration had ever before been perpetrated in the sacred precincts of the British Museum."

Baker's "Swan Song"

In the 1930s, during the Depression, the atmosphere at the Penn Museum was unsettled and difficult due to tight finances. Louise Baker had little to do until she unexpectedly received a challenging piece of work.

"I was asked to make a reconstructed drawing of a badly defaced stone lintel excavated at Piedras Negras and of rare value archaeologically. I accepted it as my 'Swan Song'... The reconstruction of this panel on paper required three hundred and sixty five hours of close work." Although much of the sculpture was missing from Lintel 3, and a number of figures were uncertain, she successfully defended her reconstruction of the original artist's intentions. After this last project, Baker retired from the Museum in 1936.

So, who is the real Mary Louise Baker? Preeminent archaeological artist of her time whose exquisitely detailed and three-dimensional drawings and paintings still garner praise from Penn Museum visitors? Strong-willed and determined woman who traveled alone to remote and exotic parts of the world where women of her era never went unaccompanied? Devout Quaker writing and speaking with thees and thous? A lifelong sufferer of precarious health, frequent and serious eye problems, and lengthy periods of severe pain? Of course, the answer can only be that Louise Baker was all of these. •

JANET SIMON has been a Penn Museum volunteer for 13 years, concentrating on the ancient Maya (or Mesoamerica). One of her recent projects in the Archives was processing the papers of M. Louise Baker.